

# Fresno Housing Authority turns 75, injecting creativity into affordable homes

By BoNhia  
Lee

- By the numbers
  - 50,000 residents
  - 17,000 families
  - 24,000 children
  - 1,900 seniors
  - 14% of Fresno County's renters are served by the authority
  - \$10,600 Average resident's annual income
  - 13,000 Housing Vouchers (Section 8)
  - 70 Multifamily housing developments
- *The Fresno Housing Authority is a joint city and county agency that administers Section 8 housing vouchers, provides affordable housing to low-income families and houses the homeless.*
- *Besides housing, the authority also works with First 5 Fresno County, Head Start, the Boys and Girls Club and local school districts to provide onsite education to children living in housing authority properties.*
- *The authority has undergone an evolution over the last five years from a predominantly affordable housing provider to community builder.*

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An affordable housing complex in southeast Reedley looks like a gated community with a sparkling blue pool and a pitched roof that towers over small homes nearby.

It's what the city expected. "We wanted high quality," said City Manager Nicole Zieba. "We didn't want something that would look bad and or blighted."

And it's what the Fresno Housing Authority delivered on a plan it pitched three years ago. The authority built 60 high-end two- and three-bedroom apartments that filled up in days at the end of last year. The city came back with a new request: help us build more. A unique mixed-use family, senior and retail development downtown is on the horizon.

Public housing isn't what it used to be. The housing authority — a rare joint city and county agency — is changing what most people know about low-income housing providers.

The organization, which celebrates its 75th anniversary this month, has made waves in recent years fulfilling its core mission while tackling homelessness, providing job skills and educational programs to residents and by finding opportunities to build in the city's urban core.

“The housing authority is being intentional in creating a more robust role in Fresno County,” executive director Preston Prince said.

“We can play a really creative role where we can think about how investment leads to not just someone being housed, but leads to economic activity that is healthy for the entire community.”

The mission

The Wagner-Steagall Housing Act, part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, designated federal money in 1937 to improve housing for low-income families. Local housing authorities would oversee the program.

The Fresno city housing authority was born in 1940. The county housing authority came along in 1946.

The two operated individually, each with a seven-commissioner board of directors, for years before coming together in 1995 for efficiency. The partnership is rare. Prince only knows of a similar situation in Idaho with the Boise City/Ada County Housing Authority. In California, the Housing Authority of the county of Santa Clara operates programs in the city of San Jose.

The two Fresno boards remain and meet together, but the agencies share the same staff — there are 220 employees — the same office services and the same executive director, Prince.

Once known as the Fresno City and County Housing Authorities, the organization is now simply the Fresno Housing Authority. It serves 17,000 families (50,000 residents), administers nearly 13,000 Housing Choice Vouchers, also known as the Section 8 housing program, and has 70 multifamily housing properties.

For most of its existence, the agency concentrated on providing “safe and sanitary housing for low- and moderate-income people,” said Commissioner Rueben Scott, the city’s longest-sitting board member, appointed in 1984.

That work included supplying and maintaining the housing stock to keep up to code, Scott said. The city’s oldest property is Sequoia Courts, a 60-unit multifamily complex with one- to four-bedroom apartments on the edge of downtown Fresno just west of Highway 99. Among the newest is CityView @ Van Ness, a 45-unit workforce housing development in downtown Fresno.

In the early days, “the city and housing authority were constantly in competition for the few dollars that were out there,” said Scott, who made it his mission to unite both entities to solve Fresno’s low-income housing issues.

And times were different. Public housing began as a way to help families transition from welfare to work in two years. Then housing discrimination became a problem. By the 1990s, public housing became a more permanent home for families.

Then the big evolution of the housing authority began.

“We started to change the architecture and the look of our housing stock so it would start to look more like communities rather than warehousing people,” Scott said.

Thinking outside the box

Creative and bold are the words community partners use to describe the last seven years of the agency’s work.

Gone are the old, box-shaped renovated army barracks of the past and in are energy-efficient, modern townhouses and apartments with thoughtful design to help neighborhoods grow.

Take Parc Grove Commons in central Fresno for example. The \$37 million development has become the authority’s shining star. Nearly 400 townhomes and apartments and an 8,800-square-foot community center were built on the 26-acre property at Clinton Avenue and Fresno Street starting in 2009.

It was formerly home to 65-year-old World War II-era army barracks known as Funston Terrace and Funston Place. Now, the corner is alive with homes in cool earth tones, columns and archways that look like many market-rate apartments. It also has energy-saving appliances, solar panels and a satellite-controlled irrigation system.

“Over the years, public housing has had such a stigma,” said Gigi Gibbs, Fresno County’s community development manager. It’s ugly with no attention to detail, but “the housing authority has really changed that. You can build something that is affordable, but still be attractive and appeal to anyone.”

“It’s not because we’re spending more money, it’s because people are creative,” she said.

Prince, the executive director, came to Fresno in 2007 from the small Aurora Housing Authority in Colorado.

His goals were to create valuable properties through renovation, to be part of downtown revitalization and to increase services for the children who live in the authority properties.

Check, check and check.

Prince was behind a \$40 million federal program to beautify, upgrade and make more energy-efficient 407 apartments in Mendota, Orange Cove and southeast Fresno. He built 45 workforce apartments in downtown Fresno. And he created partnerships with educational organizations and school districts to provide families with extra help outside of the classroom.

“Things I was hoping to do, we’re doing,” Prince said.

Peter Herzog, president of Real Estate Development Services, has worked with the authority for the last 20 years. He is a private affordable housing developer who is a development consultant and co-developer with the authority on Parc Grove Commons and Kings River Commons.

There are very few housing authorities statewide “as innovative and qualified and that understand the dynamics of the system as Preston and his team,” Herzog said.

“I was refreshed” when the authority started taking risks “because there was someone who was interested in doing something and interested in using the tools that resided in the toolbox that was never really used,” he said.

Across the country, only 100 or so housing authorities are thinking outside the box, Prince said. In California, housing authorities in San Diego and Santa Clara are doing similar and creative things, he said.

But taking risks means dealing with criticism, too. The authority’s \$11.8 million price tag on Renaissance at Santa Clara, its large homeless project near the Poverello House, was questioned when the development opened at the end of 2012. And residents wondered why all three of the authority’s homeless projects were located in the same neighborhood.

Questions also surrounded the controversial sale of the Crichton House in downtown Fresno’s Mural District. The authority sold the property to Granville Homes, which later tore down the historic building that sat on it, creating a public outcry from local historians.

The projects

At Kuffel Terrace in Orange Cove, residents are ecstatic over the newly installed dark floors that replaced dingy white stick-on squares that always looked dirty no matter how much you scrubbed.

The second bathroom added to some of the decades-old public housing units is also like gold. The additions were made possible in the authority’s federal makeover under the Rental Assistance Demonstration Program that started last year.

“The floor is better and now they upgraded to two restrooms,” said Lupe Lopez, 24, who grins from ear to ear. She lives in an apartment with her parents and two brothers in Orange Cove. “I take two hours in the bathroom on makeup and hair. They always tell me to hurry.”

Neighbor Joanna Rodriguez can't stop talking about the floors, either, or the other energy-efficient upgrades made to lights and the sprinkler system. “It's good and it helps us,” she said.

The renovations aren't glamorous, but it's an improvement to the quality of life, Prince said.

By the end of the summer, the authority hopes its Kingsburg senior housing development, Marion Villas, will be ready to open. The complex, one block north of downtown Kingsburg, was started by a for-profit developer who couldn't get it completed, Prince said.

The project wasn't easy and required several meetings with the city on making the design fit in with Kingsburg's signature Swedish architecture, he said.

Back in Reedley, plans are to build a family and senior housing complex with retail space along G Street and connect to a second building on a lot behind the storefront.

“I don't think seven years ago anyone would have come to us to do such and such that's part of our growth,” Prince said. “I think people see the work we are doing and our commitment to good management.”

Another senior housing project is planned in Firebaugh on the corner of P and 13th streets. The property was owned by the city's former redevelopment agency but will be developed by the authority into 30 units.

The authority has found an opportunity to help cities with redevelopment after Gov. Jerry Brown called for the end of the quasi-government agencies that once spearheaded the effort.

“I think losing that resource has been harmful to communities,” Prince said. “We did make a conscious decision, when RDAs went away, to ask the question of how we as a housing authority can help fill that void.”

The Firebaugh project is a good example of finding an opportunity, he said.

The authority also is working on a small renovation project in the Lowell neighborhood north of downtown Fresno. In the meantime, Prince hopes to continue strengthening the authority's community programs, such as on-site education for children and job training for adults.

“I don't think housing authority is the right term for us anymore. We are more of a community builder or a neighborhood builder ... it's really about the linkage between housing, education, employment, health and recreation.”

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